

**PEACH  
BLOSSOM  
SPRING**



# PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING

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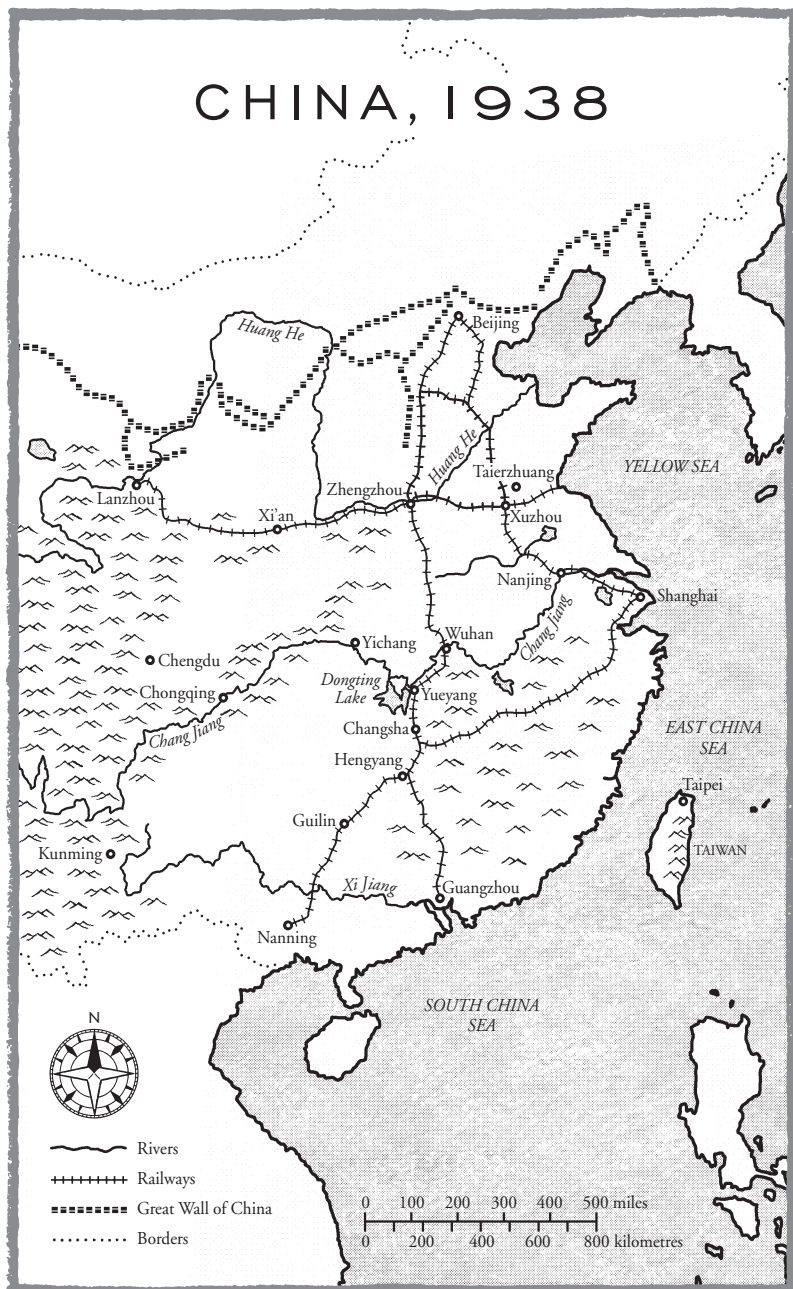


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# CHINA, 1938





For my family, and in memory of 傅惠民 (1932–2019)





## *Origins*

*Tell us, they say, tell us where you're from.*

He is from walking and walking and walking. He is from shoes filled with holes, blistered toes and calloused heels that know the roughness of gravel roads and the relief in straw, in grass. He is from staying each night in a different place, sometimes city, sometimes country. From roads that wrap around mountains and dip through valleys. From waterways shrouded in fog and mist.

He is from walking across China.

*Tell us your memories, they say.*

He remembers kerosene lamps burning low, the smell of woodsmoke, cold stone floors under his bare feet. Urgent voices, the rasping of coins, carts creaking at night. He remembers a sandalwood puzzle picture. One way up, there were one hundred monkeys. Turn it over, there were ninety-nine. How did that monkey appear and disappear? He is from this mystery.

*Tell us more, they say as they nestle by his side. How did you come here?*

He crossed rivers. He crossed oceans.

He carried a watch bought from a sailor, a letter to open doors. A suitcase, a packet of light blue aerogrammes, a single pair of wool socks.

He went towards the call of a beautiful country, a beckoning dream, a promise made of air. Towards wingbeats of birds, kaleidoscopes of seasons he'd never imagined before.

*And now, they say, their eyes clear and voices playful, tell us a story.*

To know a story is to stroke the silken surfaces of loss, to feel the weight of beauty in his hands.

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To know a story is to carry it always, etched in his bones, even if dormant for decades.

*Tell us*, they insist.

To tell a story, he realises, is to plant a seed and let it grow.

PART ONE  
1938–1941





# Chapter One

*Changsha, Hunan Province, China, March 1938*

Dao Hongtse had three wives. Their names are not important.

The first wife had the first son, Dao Zhiwen. This boy was too wild. He grabbed his first-son privileges with one hand and cast away his first-son duties with the other. He changed his name to Longwei and swaggered out of the house and into the streets. He gambled and won, then gambled and lost. Longwei loves tobacco, whiskey and women.

The first wife had two more children: a girl who grew into a sallow, thin woman whom no one wanted to marry, and a son who died at five months. With a heart bound by grief and feet bound by the old traditions, the first wife is now little more than a wraith lost in folds of opium smoke. She only ventures out of her chamber to refill her pipe and condemn the rest of the household.

Hongtse's second wife works hard. Her back is broad and her hands are rough. She lives in fear of the shrieks and howls of first wife. Hongtse doesn't love her, but he depends on her. Yet the second wife bore only daughters. Their names are not important. They married young and produced sons for other families.

His third wife was the favourite. Hongtse even loved her. She will be forever beautiful because she died in childbirth, bringing Hongtse his youngest son, Dao Xiaowen.

Dao Hongtse's business, Heavenly Light Kerosene and Antiques, has been passed down from father to son for generations. Kerosene is a good business: everyone needs heat, everyone needs light. Hongtse's customers are Nationalists, Communists, merchants, peasants, farmers. One day, Longwei will inherit the business and its responsibilities.

Up a narrow staircase, in a room above the kerosene shop, Dao

## 6 *Peach Blossom Spring*

Hongtse also trades gold coins, jade, antique carvings and hand scrolls. Easy to move, hard to trace, always valuable. He has trained Xiaowen in the art of discerning between that which is of lasting value and that which is of momentary delight.

Between his eldest and his youngest sons, Hongtse covers all possibilities. Where Longwei is street-smart, Xiaowen is book-wise. If Longwei offers bluster, Xiaowen articulates with a fine brush. What Longwei settles by force, Xiaowen negotiates. As the years pass, Longwei has only daughters, but Xiaowen has a son.

Xiaowen's son is called Dao Renshu – *renshu* meaning benevolence, kindness, not *renshu* meaning to concede, to admit defeat. Dao Hongtse makes sure his grandson knows the difference. Renshu is Hongtse's only grandchild who is the son of a son. The boy carries the family name. Above all, he must be protected.

It is a late afternoon in early spring. The air tingles with freshness, shaking off the last chill of winter and hinting at blossoms to come. Tiny leaves are opening on the trees, and each day the sun offers a bit more light. Inside Dao Hongtse's kerosene shop, the wooden floorboards are swept clean, the counter is clear. Dao Hongtse can be seen speaking to a young woman who wears a simple, dark green tunic. Her hair is pulled back in a bun. Though it is clear he is her superior, both in age and position, there is an air of mutual respect. Their relaxed postures suggest familiarity, even affection. He delivers news that illuminates her face. Although she doesn't embrace him, her elation is clear.

Then he hands her a small silk bag and says something as she looks inside. She listens carefully, then responds. He considers her answer before replying. They nod in agreement. She offers a half-bow and turns to leave the room.

A light goes on in the room above the kerosene shop.

Soon, the profile of the woman can be seen in the upstairs window.

Shui Meilin records the new inventory in her ledgers, her slim, quick fingers working the abacus. Lately, many of her father-in-law's customers have been trading gold and jade for kerosene.

Everywhere, cash is scarce and prices have been rising. Dao Hongtse instructed that these particular jewels are to be put in hock. The tearful customer who traded them for a week's supply of fuel pleaded with Old Dao not to sell them to anyone else, hoping to soon be able to buy back his heirlooms. Both Meilin and Hongtse were perturbed by this deal, yet another sign of the encroaching war with the Japanese, but Hongtse accepted the treasures for payment, of course. He is, after all, a businessman.

Meilin rises to put the valuables away, moving through the room as if by memory. After closing and locking the glass display cabinet, she looks out the window. The sun is setting, her work is done for the day, and she feels hopeful. Dao Hongtse has just told her of the Chinese army's triumph at Taierzhuang. Both Dao Hongtse's sons are expected home soon, given leave after a bloody but victorious rotation.

Meilin last saw her husband, Dao Xiaowen, and his brother Longwei nine months ago. After the Luguogiao incident up north, the brothers had left home to join the fight. Meilin and her sister-in-law, Xue Wenling, had been proud their husbands were protecting the future of the Republic. The family awaited news from the faraway frontline, but weeks passed, then months, and none came. Though disappointing, this was understandable; the post was sporadic and troops were constantly on the move.

Yet waves from the war began to push into the city of Changsha. At first it was just a trickle: hotels and guesthouses filled with wealthier people retreating from the turbulent east. Wenling remarked that at least she could see the Shanghai styles sooner. Then more refugees arrived. Shops were busier than ever, as disrupted supply lines along the rivers and railways drove prices up. The streets and markets clamoured with rallies against the Japanese aggressors. But despite these gallant displays of patriotism, the Japanese advance continued. It wasn't long before Shanghai fell, and by December, the Imperial Japanese Army had overtaken Nanjing. With Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government relocated to nearby Wuhan, a steady stream of evacuees is now pouring into Changsha.

Hongtse's news of the victory at Taierzhuang is most welcome.

The resistance was strong, the Japanese were humiliated. This, everyone is certain, will be a turning point. Best of all, Meilin can count on one hand the days until she will be able to hold her dear Xiaowen again.

Meilin's thoughts are interrupted by shrieking and giggling, followed by the sound of footsteps running across the courtyard. They thump up the stairs and down the corridor. Renshu and his cousin Liling burst into the room. Breathless and laughing, with messy hair, the two demand snacks. Renshu is three and a half, and Liling is five. Renshu's legs, still chubby, struggle to keep up with his adored cousin. Liling's face is so full of warmth and cheer that Meilin finds it hard not to smile when seeing her. When Renshu smiles, his solemn, round eyes crinkle into crescents, and the dimple in his left cheek reveals itself. Both children are flushed from racing around the compound. They have barreled through the house, knocking on the doors of the scary nainai, the ugly nainai and the dead nainai, running away before anyone could catch them. After chasing the cats into corners, up the walls and out into the streets, they'd teased Yeye's goldfish in the pond by making shadows on the water and tapping the surface with sticks.

Now, they dig through Meilin's sewing basket, looking for the sweet lotus seeds she hides for them in the folds of cloth. Once the treats are devoured, Liling roars at Renshu. She chases him around the room, past the display cabinet, until he crouches behind a carved rosewood folding screen. When she holds her arms out, fingers wiggling to tickle him, he runs to the bedroom and hides under the bedclothes, knocking a pile of neatly folded laundry to the floor.

A sharp and impatient knock comes at the door. Liling dashes under the bed and Renshu pretends to sleep.

Meilin opens the door to Liling's mother, Wenling. Though it is nearing the end of a long day, Wenling's appearance is immaculate. For as long as Meilin has known her, Wenling has eschewed traditional dress and insisted on ordering the latest Western fashions. She is always careful that her oval face shows no blemishes, although it may boast the occasional beauty spot, depending on



the trends. Today she wears her hair in glossy finger curls and exudes glamour with her dark mascara, black eyeliner, and scarlet lipstick. Sometimes Meilin is a bit intimidated by her sister-in-law's sophistication. Meilin has never bothered with the fashions. In place of powders, her nose is spattered with freckles, and her heart-shaped face suggests a radiant, rougher charm. Shorter than Wenling, she doesn't wear heels to make her any taller or tiny shoes to make her more feminine. Xiaowen has always said she is beautiful exactly as she is, and Meilin believes him.

As usual, Wenling is cross. Without bothering to acknowledge Meilin, she shouts for Liling to come out now, to stop playing, it's time for her bath.

Liling and Renshu stifle their laughter.

Wenling storms into the bedroom and stoops to look under the bed. She pulls Liling out by the ankle. When Liling stands, Wenling fusses about the line of dust on the front of her dress, glaring at Meilin. As Wenling drags her daughter downstairs, scolding her, Liling looks back and makes faces at Renshu.

Meilin motions for Renshu to tidy the mess. He tries his best, but soon tires of wrestling with the bedclothes and wanders back out to the front room to sit by his ma's side.

'Time to calm down now. You and your cousin are too naughty!' she scolds, shaking her head, but there's a lightness in her voice that suggests amusement more than reproach.

After Renshu's dinner and bath, Meilin readies him for bed. Since his birth, Meilin's days and heart have been full. She loves Renshu, not because his birth raises her place in the family, to the mother of a son of a son of Hongtse, and not just because his eyes and nose remind her of Xiaowen. She loves him because his laugh sounds like the wind playing temple bells in spring. She loves him because he fills her with a joy she hadn't known existed before he gave her his first smile. Having married late, at twenty-one, there were times she wondered if she would ever be a mother. She sings him to sleep with the 'Song of the Fishermen'. His eyes flutter closed; rest smooths his brow.

She will do anything for this child.

\*

In the quiet darkness of the room, Meilin sits for a moment, a long absent happiness rising through her. Xiaowen will be home soon. She can almost feel him in the shadows. She closes her eyes and recalls the eve of his departure.

They had returned to their rooms after the last family meal to enjoy their final evening alone. Two-year-old Renshu was sitting in his father's lap, roaring like a tiger, excited from the novelty of staying up late. Xiaowen beamed to see his boy's spirit.

'Look at this boy. He has grown fierce and strong like his ma.'

Renshu squirmed off Xiaowen's lap and roared again.

Xiaowen scooped Renshu back up. 'You take care of your ma, yes?'

Renshu nodded.

'I have to go away, but I will return soon. Right now, it's time for this baby tiger to sleep.' He squeezed Renshu tightly, and the boy's brow momentarily wrinkled. Xiaowen kissed his son's head.

After settling Renshu in the back, Meilin had come out again to the very room where she sits now. Xiaowen was at the table, a narrow wooden box in front of him. Meilin put her arms around him and kissed his neck as she sat beside him. He handed her the box, indicating she should open it.

Inside was a roll of silk brocade: creamy peony blossoms climbing a green lattice against a dark background. Gold threads traced an auspicious cloud pattern along the edges. Meilin caught her breath and stared at Xiaowen in disbelief. A hand scroll. Xiaowen nodded, encouraging her to examine it more closely. Meilin brushed off her hands, lifted it, and loosened the red tassel. Slowly, slowly, she unrolled the silk to reveal the first painted scene: ancient, silent mountains, a rushing blue-green river, a group of travellers.

She leaned forwards to examine the delicate strokes, mesmerised by the fine detail of each bird, stone and tree, the distinctions between the travellers' faces. It was astonishing. Finer work than any Meilin had ever seen.

'When did you find this?'

'Years ago, while scouting for antiques for my father.'

'And you didn't give it to him?'

‘No, not this one,’ he said, his fingertip tracing the swirls of the clouds. ‘I wanted to save it.’

‘It must be worth a fortune,’ she murmured.

‘Meilin, it is for our future. When the war is over and I return, we can use it to open our own shop.’

‘What about Heavenly Light Antiques?’

He shook his head and smiled. ‘Old Hongtse will be just fine with Longwei’s help and Wenling’s meddling. Let’s dream of something else. China is changing. We don’t need to follow every old tradition. Imagine a speciality antiques shop, just for you and me.’

Meilin threw her arms around her husband, marvelling that she had married a man who could envision such a future. Something of their own. They would build something of their own.

‘Meilin, you must promise me two things: take care of yourself and Renshu, and keep our scroll safe for our future.’

‘I promise.’

Side by side, they sat late into the night, taking in the poetry of each of the scroll’s scenes. After they put it away, they lay together in the dark, tracing the curves of arms, legs, faces. They spent the hours before dawn memorising the shape of each other.

Meilin sits at the window in the upstairs shop, waiting. Xiaowen’s regiment is expected back today.

It was nearly five years ago that he’d walked into her family’s antique shop in the western city of Yichang with a magnificent Tang sancai camel figurine to sell. Despite its age, the green, tan and cream glazes were clear and unchipped. On its back sat three musicians. The details were uncommonly delicate. Meilin immediately knew she wanted it for their collection. As they bargained for a fair price, she was delighted to discover that she shared with the young man not just a love of old treasures, but also a passion for the ideals of the new China.

Meilin’s parents, early supporters of the May Fourth Movement, believed in women’s rights and other reforms for the new republic. They had brought up all their children to know the value

of education, hard work and economic independence. Occasionally, though, they despaired that Meilin, their youngest, was *too* independent; she had already scared off many potential matches and refused several others.

However, Dao Xiaowen, this new trader from Changsha, kept returning. Sometimes to buy, sometimes to sell, but always seeking out Meilin. Haggling over trinkets evolved into heated discussions about replacing the old traditions with the rigours of Mr Science and Mr Democracy, and dissections of the finer points of Dr Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles.

After several months, no one was surprised when Xiaowen and Meilin fell in love. To her parents' delight, she agreed to marry him, two years her senior by age, but her equal in intellect and outlook.

In her new home, Meilin quickly settled into Dao Hongtse's upstairs antiques shop. Hongtse marvelled at how easily she learned the location and provenance of every item in the inventory. He was quick to notice the flawless sums in the ledgers were always in her hand. Hongtse jests, with fondness, that Meilin is, without doubt, the finest treasure Xiaowen has ever found.

Whether through business acumen or canny foresight with regard to his daughter-in-law's strong personality, Hongtse had given his blessing for Xiaowen and Meilin to live in the rooms behind the antiques shop. While still in the Dao family compound, Meilin and Renshu live apart from the rest of the family, separated by the courtyard. In this way, Meilin can slip away from a household filled with mothers-in-law, elder sisters, nieces, nephews, and a revolving collection of cousins, uncles, aunts and other distant relations who continually appear with hopes that Hongtse will share his good fortune.

Now, Meilin's ears prick up as an army jeep turns and heads down the road, slowing as it approaches the compound. She cries out in excitement and runs downstairs to greet it, arriving before any of the others.

When the door of the jeep opens, Longwei gets out. He wears his olive green service uniform with gleaming brass buttons, and black leather boots that go up to his knees. A thick,

dark brown leather belt cinches his waist, and a smart cap emblazoned with the Republic's Blue Sky with a White Sun sits on his head. He grabs his duffel, then straightens his tall frame, holding his head high. He salutes the driver, and the jeep drives off.

'But – where is . . .?'

Longwei's normally imperious eyes look mournful.

'Xiaowen?' Meilin's voice sounds small and not her own. A strange silence descends.

'He was a hero,' Longwei says at last. 'He was a hero at Taierzhuang.'

'Where is he?'

Longwei repeats it once more. 'He was a hero.'

There must be a misunderstanding. Meilin spins around, looking for another jeep. The road is empty. Where is Xiaowen? Both the brothers were expected. Hongtse said both. He must be coming soon.

'He was a hero at Taierzhuang,' Longwei says again, in a voice marked with pride, disbelief and, most of all, sorrow.

'Stop saying that. *Hero* means nothing.' Her voice rises to a shriek. 'Did he die? Tell me!'

But Longwei only lowers his eyes and shakes his head.

She flies at him, hammering her fists against his chest. 'No! No!'

He catches her arms and holds them. She is sobbing, sobbing. She feels her body collapse into his. The coarse weave of his coat is rough against her cheek.

'I don't know,' he says quietly. 'I didn't see him again.'

A cold cough sounds behind them. She can barely lift her head to look up. It is Wenling. Longwei gently steps back from Meilin to embrace his wife.

Now the rest of the household has come out to greet Longwei. Meilin watches their reunions as if they are actors on a stage. Every part of her feels stunned, and the question *Where is Xiaowen?* echoes in her head, its answer unthinkable: *No one knows.* Through the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, everything is muffled, numb. *Where is Xiaowen?*

Grateful for Longwei's return, Hongtse's household is enveloped in sombre celebration. Victory is costly: many families have no sons returning. At least they have one.

Somehow, Meilin makes it through the day to dinnertime. She is grateful for the distraction of routine, helping to bring a multitude of dishes to the table as wives and children start to congregate. She hears Wenling calling to her girls.

Wenling has a voice like porcelain. It slides over the ear, leaving the listener aware of their own rough surfaces. As Wenling walks down the corridors, her jade bracelets clink with each step, announcing her approach. When she enters the dining room, stepping over the high threshold, she nods in Meilin's direction without making eye contact, and surveys the table, checking the number of place settings, counting the dishes and bestowing smiles or censure among those gathered.

Working in his father's kerosene business, Longwei had spent years travelling the Chang Jiang between Wuhan and Shanghai, collecting shipments and supervising distributions in towns and cities along the river. It was on one of these journeys that he found Wenling. The daughter of a prominent and rich Nanjing businessman, her elegance and pedigree enchanted Longwei. He courted her with an ambitious, acquisitive passion. They soon married in great ceremony, with hundreds of guests and an elaborate banquet. As her ageing mother-in-law has grown more reclusive, Wenling has become the taitai in the house, domineering and idle. It suits her.

All the women and children are now at the table except Wenling's own daughters, Lifen and Liling. She calls for them again, impatient. Although Wenling seems all smooth surfaces, cracks show when she speaks to her daughters. Lifen slinks in the room, eyes lowered, but not apologetic. The girl has all her mother's mannerisms, but not her devastating beauty. Instead, the seven-year-old's face echoes her father's features, the strong nose and heavy brow that speak authority in a man but will one day cause people to describe Lifen as 'striking'. She has broad shoulders and a short back. Her ear lobes are too long, and her

arms and legs too short to move with Wenling's grace, but she already bears the same air of expecting much more than that which has been offered to her. Two steps behind Lifen is Liling, with untidy pigtailed and ink spots on her face. She has Wenling's delicate build and bones, her smooth skin and clear eyes, but somehow the allure seems washed away, as if the child is aware of the perpetual disappointment she represents to her father for not being a son, and to her mother for being too dreamy and soft-hearted.

Throughout the meal, Wenling fawns on her husband, periodically tracing the red insignia with three gold triangles on his lapel. His daughters cling to his sides. Dao Hongtse gives Longwei a rare and grudging nod of approval. Meilin tries to be happy – she *is* happy for Longwei – but what about Xiaowen? When Renshu asks for his ba, Meilin holds him close and murmurs on the top of his head that his ba is a hero. And maybe his ba will come home with the next group of soldiers. Meilin glances up and notices Dao Hongtse listening to her. When their eyes meet, she sees his are filled with worry and fear for his lost son.

Meilin makes it through the evening, holding her composure. But in the quiet of her rooms that night, after Renshu has fallen asleep, she takes out Xiaowen's scroll and weeps until dawn.

The summer passes in a blur of sorrow and disbelief. Xiaowen doesn't return with the next convoy, or any after. The wives and sisters, intending kindness, pressure Meilin to move to the big house, but Meilin refuses. She wants to stay where she and Xiaowen set up their life together. Maybe he will still come home. Hongtse, broken by the loss of his youngest son, lets her do as she wishes.

The leaves turn to gold and red, and Xiaowen still doesn't appear. Without him, Changsha no longer feels like home. Meilin writes to her family in Yichang, begging them to let her come home and bring Renshu with her. Yet, for all their progressive views about New Culture, they adhere to the tradition that she is now a member of the Dao family. She and her son must stay.

Besides, they plan to close their shop and move to their ancestral compound in the hills above Yichang. Given all the turmoil in the east, it is a necessary precaution.

*Yuelu Mountain, Hunan Province,  
China, October 1938*

Meilin strikes a match. It flares, then fizzles in the damp, drizzly air. She sighs.

‘Maybe we shouldn’t be burning paper money for Xiaowen. What if he isn’t really dead? What if all these riches show up for him in the afterlife and he isn’t there?’

‘I don’t believe any of that.’ Longwei scans the families walking the path up Yuelu Shan, here to revere the tombs of their ancestors and remember the lost. Even with the uncertainties of war, people have still come out for the Double Ninth Festival. Perhaps during these times it is even more necessary to hold on to celebrations. Longwei seems to be searching for someone. Meilin wonders who. Not his wife and daughters, certainly. Wenling was quick to excuse herself when the morning arrived with heavy clouds spitting rain. Suddenly maternal, she pointed out Lifan’s delicate nature and Liling’s fading cough, claiming the cold air would make them suffer. She said she’d stay home to supervise the Chongyang cakes for later. Besides, Wenling sniffed, it wasn’t *her* husband who was probably dead.

Their coats rip and flap in the wind. Meilin tries again. The matchstick snaps in half without lighting. She drops it on the sodden pile of yellow and brown leaves at her feet.

Nearby, Hongtse and Renshu launch bamboo boats on a small pond. Hongtse has promised Renshu a gold coin for the one that carries the most stones without sinking. They have spent the morning lining up boats, trying to decide which could balance speed and seaworthiness while maximising cargo. Children from other families have wandered over to join in, fashioning make-shift boats from twigs and dry leaves.

‘On the other hand,’ she muses, ‘maybe it’s like filling a bank



account for the future. If he does arrive in the afterlife, he will find that he is already a rich man.'

When Longwei doesn't answer, Meilin glances over at him. He is monitoring the edges of the cemetery, noting who comes in and out. Since his return from Taierzhuang, Longwei hasn't worn a soldier's uniform. He says he has been promoted. Whatever his new role, Longwei is no longer strictly a military man. Most days, he stations himself in Hongtse's kerosene shop. Men come and go. Sometimes they wear the leggings and uniform of the Kuomintang. Sometimes they wear Western suits or traditional scholars' robes. They are not Hongtse's usual customers. They are a rougher sort, hissing names of towns and crossroads. There seems to be a lot more arguing than kerosene selling. From a chair in the corner, Hongtse scowls and mutters about filial piety, but Longwei ignores him. Eventually, he quiets and listens to the harsh, urgent words that pass between Longwei and these men. Longwei calls them his brothers. They are, none of them, his brothers.

She studies Longwei's profile now. He could be a younger, more ruthless Hongtse. Both are over six feet tall, but Longwei's broader shoulders suggest a dominance, a forcefulness the old man lacks. He is muscular where his father is lean. A long scar runs down his left forearm. Is it from a fight? She squints to see any traces of Xiaowen in him. No. There is nothing to suggest these two shared a father.

As if he can hear her thoughts, Longwei turns to face her, eyes glittering. He bares his tea-and-nicotine-stained teeth as he takes a cigarette from a packet and holds it in his mouth. When he strikes a match, it catches instantly. He lights his smoke, then flicks out the flame.

'My brother was a fool.'

Meilin is taken aback. Had she spoken aloud?

'Xiaowen was a good man,' she counters. 'He wouldn't play mahjong and chase singing girls in the teahouses. He wouldn't deal with those thugs of yours who come and go from the shop all day long.' She pauses. Longwei still watches the ground, but his jaw has stiffened. Although she is usually cautious, the rustle

of activity in the kerosene shop over the past weeks, and Longwei's preoccupation today makes her bold. 'He wouldn't cheat his own father of shipments and gloss the books.'

Meilin expects a reprimand, a denial, or at least some kind of justification.

Instead, Longwei drops his cigarette on the ground and crushes the embers underfoot. He inhales deeply, blows out through his teeth, then stares hard at Meilin. He steps closer. She holds her ground and stares back.

'A good man,' he sneers. 'Good men die or disappear. Haven't you noticed by now?' He is about to continue when Renshu runs up, holding the champion bamboo boat in one hand and a new gold coin in the other. Longwei's expression shifts from spiteful to welcoming. He gathers Renshu in his arms and lifts him to his chest. The boy squeals, kicking his legs and laughing. Unease swims through Meilin's stomach.

'Soon, the grain will shed its husk and come forth,' Longwei says to the boy as he sets him down. Renshu ignores his uncle's words and races back to Hongtse. Longwei turns to address Meilin again. 'Change is coming, Meilin. It's barely been ten days since Guangzhou fell, and now this defeat in Wuhan. It's been our good fortune to avoid bombings so far, but Changsha is no longer safe.' Longwei grasps her shoulders and looks directly at her, face to face.

The strength of his grip is unsettling, his usual smugness is gone. Why didn't he argue back when she challenged him?

'Be ready. For anything. Understand?' A peppery, tobacco-tinted heat radiates from him. He lifts his head, gazes past her. Whatever he's been looking for, he finally sees it. After giving her shoulders a firm squeeze, he drops his hands and walks away.

Meilin swallows. She massages one of her shoulders.

A family of three has assembled at a tomb nearby: two parents and a young girl. They carry willow baskets filled with flowers, incense and other offerings. The father uses his coat to shelter his family from the wind, and the mother kneels and sets up the shrine. The girl places a wreath of zhuyu twigs on the ground, the red berries a bright spot in the dull day. Together, mother and daughter arrange a stack of oranges and place a small flask of

chrysanthemum liquor alongside. A perfect pyramid of devotion. With a fine-tipped brush and a pot of red paint, the mother refreshes the faded inscriptions while the father winks at the girl. Finally, she lights the incense, and all three stand and bow. A thin wisp of smoke rises, then drifts away in the wind.

A sudden gust scatters the paper money Meilin holds loosely in her hand. She rushes to gather the soggy scraps, now crumpled and soiled.

*Changsha, Hunan Province, China, November 1938*

Today, everything feels different to Renshu. The voices from the shop downstairs are louder than usual. The door opens and closes every few minutes. A parade of heavy footsteps pounds in and out.

He settles into a familiar activity: as his ma sews, Renshu takes apart the three stacked sections of her sewing basket, sifting through the spools of thread, looking for his favourites. Peacock blue, emperor's crimson, gold like a cup of oolong. He bites his lip in concentration, lays them lengthways, side-by-side on the wooden floor. Then, with a long slat of wood, he gives them all an equal push. The coloured strands unwind like a wobbly rainbow. Some days, the winner is the fastest. Others, it's the one that rolls the furthest. He winds the threads back up and races other colours, other combinations, looking for the champion.

When he tires of the game, he sorts through the carved cinnabar box of jade charms, golden bells and silver coins that sits by his ma's side. Every so often, she picks up a coin and continues sewing. It seems like she's been doing this for weeks. He likes to examine the jade pendants: a plum, a serpent, a buddha. He holds them up to the window, one at a time, and watches the sun's late light stream through, revealing white veins in the green stone. His favourite is the three-legged toad with a gold coin in its mouth. The best part is that the coin rotates. Renshu spins it with his index finger, watching its uneven rattle and whirr until it slows to a stop, and then he spins it again.

When they hear the stairs creak, Meilin's brow creases. She shushes Renshu and takes the treasures from his hands, slips them back into the box, closes the lid, and puts it in the bottom section of her basket. She folds her sewing over the box. Sensing her urgency, Renshu lines up the basket's middle section and presses it down snugly. Meilin rests the last basket, the one with spools, needles, buttons and scissors on top. As she picks up her knitting, she releases a long, careful exhale, and the line of worry across her forehead fades. Renshu fills his hands with buttons to show to Uncle or Yeye, or whoever is coming along the corridor.

It is Uncle and two big men. Although Renshu usually jumps into Uncle's arms when he sees him, the men make him shy, so Renshu stays quiet. The men carry a large wooden crate. They have a leathery, smoky smell that Renshu isn't sure about. One of the men has big boots, and the other a long beard and moustache. Uncle and his ma start arguing.

Uncle waves at some of the antiques and the men open the crate and start loading things into it: lamps, paintings, small sculptures. At first they pack carelessly. Renshu's ma says some sharp words and reaches behind a counter for a stack of soft cloths. Uncle barks at the men and they take all the pieces out, one by one, and start over. This time, they use the cloths to wrap each item. Uncle goes over to a pot in the corner that holds many scrolls. He grabs an armful of them and asks Ma something. She's not happy. She scowls and gives him a box of charms, but not the one in her basket. The men have filled the crate with treasures. Now they knock nails in the top to seal it up. Once they've shouldered the crate and left, Ma lets out a big sigh and slides down to the floor with her back against the door.

After a few moments, Meilin rises and goes into their bedroom. Renshu hears her moving furniture. She returns holding a narrow wooden box. She beckons him to sit by her side at a low wooden table that, until moments ago, held dragon lamps and phoenix carvings. She invites him to open the box. Inside is a scroll. Renshu lifts it up. He loosens the tassel. Meilin leans forwards to help him lay it flat on the table. When the first scene is

fully revealed, she places one hand on his to stop him unrolling it any further. Her other hovers over the columns of characters as she reads aloud. This, she tells him, is a story of travelling scholars. Here they start with strong legs and bright eyes. They will follow the river and the sun.

Below them, the kerosene shop boils with arguments and rough laughter that carries no mirth. Worried words fog the air: *The Japanese approach from the north and the south. Like a pincer.*

Renshu prods Meilin. He wants to see more. As he unrolls the next scene, Meilin rolls up the section they have just read. Once more, she stays his hand when the full scene is revealed. Again, she reads the poetry, conducting its music and story. For the rest of the afternoon, they journey through the scroll, scene by scene, discovering details and making up stories. Guiding Renshu, she shows him her favourite parts: here, the tiger sleeps and the travellers pass without harm. There, in the crowded market, the cleverest scholar wins a game of chance and wit. On narrow bridges over mountain streams, travellers contemplate the constancy of ever-flowing motion.

‘Renshu,’ whispers his ma, ‘have you noticed that none of the travellers face backwards? They move forwards through the landscapes and never look back.’

Cigarette smoke and the rattling of kerosene bottles float up from the shop. Talk of bridges, railroads and rivers creeps along the walls. *Leave nothing of value behind.*

Remember, she says, these travelling scholars carry everything they need on their backs. They leave behind anything that weighs them down. Remember, she says, that regret is a heavy burden. And as she puts an arm around Renshu and points at the traveller resting underneath cherry blossoms at the end of his long journey, she whispers, ‘Remember that to have an orchard is to honour the generations that came before and will come after.’

He nods. He will remember.

That night, when a hand grips her shoulder and shakes her awake, Meilin is not surprised. Longwei’s voice is low, but the urgency is unmistakable.

‘We need to leave. Now. Go out the back.’

She blinks in the night and sees his silhouette disappear through the doorway.

Though it is quiet and dark, if she strains, she can hear rustling across the courtyard, in the house.

Meilin pulls her sewing basket close, unstacks the layers, checks that the box of coins and charms is still at the bottom. From under her bed, she retrieves the two silk jackets, one large, one small, that she has been padding with notes and coins for weeks. The lumpy bundles in her hands offer a cool, soft reassurance. She puts them aside; they will wear them. On the floor is the box containing the scroll. She wraps it in cloth and puts it in her basket. Her heart thuds and tears smart behind her eyes. More sounds of muffled, hurried movement disturb the house. Meilin reassembles her basket. She tugs the handles together. The basket is heavy, but there is nothing in it she wants to leave behind.

A cart rolls by. Outside, a few lights still blink in the houses and streets. She stands and watches Renshu, his eyes closed, his breath unhurried and warm. Another cart stops outside and she hears fierce whispers. She waits another thirty seconds in absolute stillness, inhales deeply, and cups her hand around his small shoulder.

In the cart, Renshu stretches his legs, pushing against her sewing basket. Just as they’ve left their street and are approaching the market, an explosion rocks the air. Renshu twists and arches his back to see, but Meilin tightens her grip to block his view. She gives him a wooden puzzle, tells him to count the monkeys. Absorbed in his task, she keeps him facing forward.

Heat and brightness light the night. Flames crackle, shouts carry on the wind. Meilin’s eyes sting from the smoke, and her heart is racing. When she turns and looks back, she gasps: Hongtse’s shop is burning.

‘What is it, Ma?’ Renshu asks, wriggling.

Meilin swallows her fear, steadies herself, ‘Shhh, it’s okay,’ she tells him.

Han, the servant who pulls the cart, turns down another alleyway.

‘Where are we going? What about the others?’ she asks.

‘Big fire, ma’am, big fire! To the meeting place,’ he says, and continues.

Alarm bells are clanging. They pass structure after structure blazing in the night.

It wasn’t only Dao Hongtse’s shop.

The city is a sea of flames. The roads are filling as others flee the blaze. Some in carts, some in wagons filled with families, furniture, pots, sacks of grain. Many people are on foot, balancing shoulder poles with hastily packed and overflowing baskets. And there are some who escaped with only their nightclothes and whatever they could grab. Army jeeps weave through the masses, headed against the flow, towards the burning city. A few motor cars, caught in the snarl, honk their horns and rev their engines. The fire alarm bells clang over the continuing smoke and flames.

The cart jostles over the bumpy road, making Meilin’s teeth chatter. Han rushes around a corner, and Renshu is flung out of Meilin’s arms, towards the edge of the seats. ‘Ma!’ he cries out in alarm. Meilin pulls him back on to her lap and leans forwards to shield him, covering his ears and eyes.

Another explosion, like thunder in her lungs. Cases fall off the back of the cart, but Han doesn’t stop. A whoosh of hot wind engulfs them, blowing smoke and cinders into the night.

Meilin glances over her shoulder once more. Although the flames make the air shimmer, chills run down her arms. She won’t look back again.